

Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project
Labor Archives of Washington
University of Washington Libraries Special Collections

Allan Hirsch
Musician, Storyteller, and Music Teacher
Member, American Federation of Musicians, Local 76-493

Narrator: Allan (Al) Hirsch

Interviewers: Mark Rodgers

Subjects: folk music, children's music, gigs, performances, parks, festivals, fairs, schools, Montessori, teaching, masks, classes, unemployment, 2008 recession, travel, King County arts programs, storytelling, self-employment, pandemic, re-opening, vaccinations, union

Location: Seattle, Washington, USA

Date: June 18, 2021

Interview Length: 01:46:34

File Name: HirschAllan_2021_C19_Video_Interview_Completed.mp4

Mark Rodgers 00:00:16

So my name is Mark Rodgers. I'm a lecturer in music history at the University of Washington. The day is Friday, June 18, 2021. It's 3:50pm. And I'm sitting on the campus of the University of Washington—the Seattle campus—here in Seattle, Washington. I'm speaking with Al Hirsch, who is in—Al are you in Seattle?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:00:40

Yes

Mark Rodgers 00:00:41

Al is in Seattle, and we are recording this interview for the Musical Work in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project. So Al, I'm going to begin by asking you a series of questions about yourself and your background. And the purpose of these questions, among other things, is to provide future researchers with some basic contextual information about you, who you are, and what you're bringing to this interview, so that they

don't necessarily make any assumptions. So first of all, this I think, is the easiest question. What is your name? And can you spell your first name and your last name for us, please?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:01:22

My name is Allan, spelled A-L-L-A-N and the last name is Hirsch, H-I-R-S-C-H.

Mark Rodgers 00:01:31

Thank you. And what is your date of birth? And where were you born?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:01:37

I was born in Brooklyn, New York and February 28, 1951.

Mark Rodgers 00:01:43

February 28. Great. And with what gender, if any, do you identify and what are your preferred pronouns?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:01:54

Hey, the kids call me Mr. Allan all the time, you know? (laughs) Just I'm a male. I'm a typical human being, you know, old fashioned.

Mark Rodgers 00:02:06

Great. And what race or ethnicity, if any, do you identify and how important is racial or ethnic background?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:02:12

Uh—I have—you know, when I was a kid, my mom would answer this question as "what nationality we are?" And she'd say, "Well, we're Heinz 57 variety", because she knew that my father's—you know, family had quite a few--we had Irish, Scottish, German, Polish Russian--and her side equally. So—I'm Northern European.

Mark Rodgers 00:02:41

Great, thank you. Do you (laughs) regularly now—do you participate in any social, political, ethnic, racial or religious communities that are important to your sense of identity?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:02:53

I'm more a part of the counterculture, if anything. I'm not really a part of any political group. I mean, I vote. But I mean, that's--I'm not really involved in politics in that sense. I work a lot with the Montessori community and early childhood educators. I work with teachers all over the world. I train teachers in different places. Mostly I—if I belong to communities, to people who work with children, [?I stick to?] things as well.

Mark Rodgers 00:03:33

Yeah. Just a quick question, for clarification. So do you work exclusively with Montessori teachers or with teachers trained [inaudible] _____?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:03:42

I do—also I do— uh—workshops and presentations for teachers of all backgrounds. I do a lot with Montessori because my wife and I started a Montessori school, 38 years ago, and I still go there and I do conferences, it ultimately comes down to who's going to hire me. (laughs) Whoever wants to pay me to come do it, I'll do it, whether it's the early childhood community here in Washington, I've done a lot of things for them, I've done things all over Canada and South America, you know. So it's, it all depends on who wants me to do it.

Mark Rodgers 00:04:18

Yeah

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:04:18

I don't--I love Montessori, but I also have my own understanding of the importance of music in the life of a child and it's not necessarily related to Montessori. (airplane flies overhead) Montessori has a real scribe music method, and I have my own, so, yeah.

Mark Rodgers 00:04:41

Well, thank you. I'll probably ask you a little bit about that later on. Can I also first though, now ask you just to confirm again, you live in Seattle now?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:04:50

Yes, I do. I've been here. I've lived in the same house for 32 years.

Mark Rodgers 00:04:55

Wow, great. I'm just guessing that Seattle has changed quite a bit over that time.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:05:01

Yeah. When I first moved to Seattle in the mid-70s [1970's], it was like a small town. There was no traffic jams. You know, people were moving much slower. And houses were cheap. A house on Queen Anne was 25 or \$30,000 in the 70s, just to give you an idea (laughs). It took awhile. It took a good 10 to 15 more years before it really started changing, but there's still that small town feel. There's still--we're surrounded by nature still. Even in the middle of a city, we have raccoons and possums and coyotes. And it's still pretty nice here. Just crowded.

Mark Rodgers 00:05:51

(Crickets chirping)—Speaking of crickets

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:05:52

Yeah. (pauses) Let me just turn my phone off for now—All right. Where were we?

Mark Rodgers 00:06:10

You were telling me about Seattle when you first moved here? I think you—

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:06:16

It was just not as many people. The Ballard Bridge was still the Ballard Bridge and Queen Anne was almost just like it is now, except for fewer people. You know, there's not a lot of physical changes, like the block I live on is almost identical to what it was when I moved in here. One brand new house built, actually two. The rest of it's all exactly the same as when I moved in. There's been remodeling on the inside, but the outsides are all identical. so it stays kind of the same.

Mark Rodgers 00:06:52

And that's in Queen Anne just to confirm?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:06:56

I live in Magnolia.

Mark Rodgers 00:06:58

Okay, great. Okay, so shifting gears just a little bit. What--how would you describe your current occupation or perhaps your professional identity?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:07:10

Well, I--for the last, god knows how many years. So 35 years I've been a full time, self-employed musician-storyteller,-educator, doing freelance. I'm a classic gig worker. (laughs) So I do anything from concerts in schools and school assemblies to--or you know, music classes, teachers' conferences, as I already mentioned. I do birthday parties, festivals, fairs, pretty much everything you know. I've been doing it full time for all those years. So it's, you know, when you're self-employed another way of describing that as you're always looking for a job. Something new, you know.

Mark Rodgers 00:08:06

It sounds like you end up taking a pretty wide variety of jobs?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:08:10

Oh, yeah, I do county fairs, I do festivals. Like last week, I went over to Yakima, did a graduation party for a school that I had done before. Monday, I'm doing a show down on the waterfront as part of Make Music Day Seattle. It's an international best free music on the streets all over the place. I do Senior Centers sometimes, I do schools. I used to do a lot of parks department things are not happening right now. We when we get to the pandemic, we talk about all that stuff. But there's a lot of things that are not happening right now. So I also have been teaching. It's hard for me to call it teaching. I offer an experience to children. That includes vocal instruction, and rhythm and music, but it's kind of a mixed bag of stories and music and puppets and physical movement. I've been doing that consistently for almost exclusively Montessori schools for thirty-some years. And I did that all the way through the pandemic until I got vaccinated. And then I started going in person again.

Mark Rodgers 00:09:33

So this is chiefly a project focused on music and musical work that I'm--for which I'm interviewing you currently. But you've spoken several times about the—I think you see yourself not just as a musician, but also you mentioned you're a storyteller as well. Right. So I don't want to downplay that aspect of the work that you do here. But I am interested in knowing about how you first came to a career in music. And perhaps you could also tell us about how you became a storyteller, too.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:10:05

Oh, well I, as a child, my parents gave me a stack of Classical 45's. You don't know what a 45 is I'm guessing it's a little records, you know? And they were all classical marches you know, and you know, William Tell Overtures and stuff like that. And, and so I would build blocks is when I was like five years old. I'd build blocks by listening to those and, and then, of course, I got into Elvis when Elvis came out, and I was singing Elvis Presley songs. And my mom always said to me, you're gonna do something with your voice someday. And all the way through elementary school, I sang because that was part of school, then. We sang all the time. Even in high school, we kept singing. Part of it was, you know, I went to Catholic school. So it was church and singing was a big part of reality, and football games, just sang. And then, when--I hadn't really learned any musical instrument up until that point in time, I wanted to be a drummer. My father always said to me, "You make too much noise already. I'm not letting you play the drums." Always tapping. (taps feet) My feet are always moving. (laughs) And so I drove them crazy, anyway. And then my sister had given me one of her Castaway little guitars, which was terrible to play, but I messed around with it, but I really didn't learn anything. And then I went to college. And in college, I started hanging out with people who actually played music all the time. Piano players, guitar players, and I sang with them and eventually took voice classes in college, and played the drums for a while. And then I did that for a few years after college, kept playing the drums. And then I picked up guitar, started learning guitar and learning--I started writing songs and collecting folk material. Let's see I'm into the 70's here already so--And I was in a group of people called the Love Family, which is a big commune. It was on Queen Anne Hill. And there were lots of guitars and lots of players, and so I started learning how to play guitar and learning old time folk songs. And because I worked with kids, I started learning folk material. And it was kind of by happenstance, somebody says, "Oh, do you know that song with Tom Paxton song, The Marvelous Toy", I said, "I've heard that before." And so somebody would teach me one song, Puff the Magic Dragon. And I started accumulating those songs. And then I started teaching the kids those songs. When I was already familiar with Woody Guthrie's music, and Pete Seeger, things you heard on the radio. And so I started singing with kids and teaching kids singing. I was in a choir at that time, where we learned something that I still use today called the Italian opera chants. They're these vocal exercises using the five vowels. "Oo, Eh, Ee, Oh, Ah" and you learn to sing scales and thirds. And, you know, it's for breath control, as well as tone matching, you know, and you learn to sing along with the piano or the xylophone or something. And then I started doing those with kids, And I've been doing those with children ever since. My daughter went into the Seattle girls choir. And at one point, they wanted to know what I did with young kids, because rumor was out there that I had three, four and five year olds singing. And so I said, "Well, you got to come see me, what I do." And the director of the Seattle girls choir sat in on one of my classes, and he couldn't believe that I got three year olds doing these Italian opera chants (laughs) and other things, you know. So I started working for them a little bit, doing some classes for them. (pauses) And the guy that taught me that his name was Bill Craig, he's a musician down in the Bay Area now, he's a composer. I contacted him recently, I said, "You know, I'm still using those opera chants you taught us back in the 70's." And he said, "Really?" Because he learned them when he was in college from his professor, and he didn't know anybody still did that. I just found it so easy to get a three year old to sing or a four year old to sing. It has to be simple. You're just singing, (sings) "Oooo." You sing it in a scale and it's--In my Montessori training, I learned that what Maria Montessori did was she took every idea and

whittled it down to its core. And so you learn a concept long and short, and then you learn a concept broad and narrow, and every piece of equipment was one of those things. And so I feel like that's what I did for children, was I took the voice, teaching voice down to the just sounds, and the facial expressions you make when you make those sounds helped form the larynx correctly. This is all things I've learned since then through voice therapists and people that I've talked to. You might know more about this than you're letting on. And so I continue to do that to this day. And in the process, I've collected hundreds of things to do, vocally, with kids. I met a Swedish Montessori teacher who taught me a poem that's set to the musical scale. So you go up and down the scale and recite the poem. And it's cute, it has some action, physical action for these little three, four, or five and six year olds. And that was the first one and then I found another one, then I made up a few. And then I kept going until I made a little book about it for teachers. I call it "Xylophoni Macaroni." It's all little things you can do with an eighth note xylophone. Anybody can do it. Even a non musical person can play that xylophone and sing, "Oo" up and down that scale, and "Ee" and "Oh," and so on. So and then of course, you know, I went further with it than that. But it's there's all kinds of little tricks and little fun things to do. So I just kept doing that, and I'm still doing it today. I did one this morning. It's over now. That was my last class until probably sometime in the end--the beginning of July. I'll have a few this summer, but mostly I don't do them in the summer. And that's been my mainstay. When you're self-employed, it's nice to have something that's regular. And I learned many years ago that if you want to be a musician, and you want to be financially—I'll use the word stable, for lack of a better term. You have to do three things: you have to teach, you have to perform, and you have to publish. And so I've made numerous recordings of original children's music and collected children's music as well as things for little kids. Also I did a lot of work with elementary aged kids as well. And so I have songs for them. I've been an artist in residence at different schools where I teach, first, second, third graders. I have a bunch of kindergarten and first graders this year on Zoom for awhile. So I think I've covered how I got started. I tell you, musically speaking, I played six string guitar for the longest time. And then one day I found something called a ukulele. And it just—it just expanded my ability and my knowledge of how to play guitar. Baritone ukulele in particular, it's tuned the same way as a guitar, and I was able to really, just understand the fretboard more and move around, more movable chords and that kind of stuff than I ever used on a six string or twelve string guitar. So I play ukulele, I also play Appalachian dulcimer. One of the things—it was my first instrument really. I bought one right after I graduated from college, before I even had a guitar. And I don't know if you know the Appalachian dulcimer, there's two distinct ways to play it. One is chording it and fingering it like a fingerstyle guitar. And that's more of the modern way of playing it. And the traditional way was playing with a feather and a stick, and it's called noting and droning, where you just play the melody line on two strings, and then the rest is droning. And I use that in my music classes to play "Name that Tune." I will play a song and I won't tell them what it is. And they have to sing it back to me. It's this little game, we call it—I call it, it's time to trick the kids. "Oh, here's one I don't think you know this one." And I play it, and they are "we know that one!" And they start singing it. And in my training of teachers, I always tell them, "You can't make them sing. You have to trick them into singing. Make it fun. But at the same time you want them to sing without you. What does their voice sound like? Not just your voice." Most kids will sing along with somebody. And they tend to mouth the words and not enunciate. But when they're singing by themselves, they enunciate better. So that's one of the games that I use a lot. I'll do 10 songs in every half hour session with them like that. And you know I've got 50 or 60 songs that I use. Typical kid—little kid songs. So anything else? I'm always experimenting. Oh, another thing that happened to me was, in my years of recording for kids, I've met various different musicians and I had met this man named Doug Bright. He was born blind. And when his parents realized that he was going to have a tough life, they said, "Well, we're not going to sit around and do nothing." So they started giving him musical instruments. And, by the time he was eight, he was playing the accordion on television. And he's a master musician. He's in his 70's now. He's been in bands for 30 or 40 years. He can play so many instruments. He's a master of the chromatic harmonica, piano, guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, the list goes on. And so I would hire him to come into the recording studio, and he would bring everything. He would bring a bass and he would put all the tracks down for me, which was really nice to have one person. And one day he asked me, "So let's do something together." So what do you mean? "You're the only person I know that collects old folk songs.

Let's do a little folk act." And so about four or five years ago, we started doing that. And we've got a bunch of videos up on YouTube of us playing at festivals and coffee houses and senior centers. We've had—let's see two, three shows already since we've had our vaccination and we're back at it again slowly. That's a whole--

Mark Rodgers 00:21:31

For the record, can you tell us what the name that group is?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:21:35

We call ourselves the Marvelous Minstrel Boys.

Mark Rodgers 00:21:39

Fantastic. Thank you.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:21:41

And we play all the time. You know, if you're familiar with Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and their contemporaries, we play a lot of that Kingston Trio, and some even older things. And both of us are historians. And so there's always a backstory to every song, like Abraham Lincoln's favorite song was the Blue Tailed Fly. And I always thought it was a song that had been written by African American children. (sings) "Jimmy crack corn, I don't care." But it turns out that only the chorus was written by them. An abolitionist had written the other words. You dig deep enough, you'll find the rest of the story, but that's the kind of stuff we'd like to talk about where the song came from, who wrote it. And even just recently, I've been digging into some of the old Elvis stuff. That's All Right Mama was an Arthur Crudup song. And he stopped recording because he was so mad because everybody else was making money on his songs, and he wasn't. And he recorded that song in the [19]40's, and he's considered the father of rock and roll, or one of them. You know that style of blues and rhythm and blues, they didn't have a name for, became rock and roll. And so he was one of the originators of all of that. So we love that kind of stuff. And we do--we probably have about 100 songs in our repertoire of maritimes songs and, we've done some kids things together too. And the nice thing about Doug is he has an amazing ear. (laughs) He hasn't been able to see, so his ear has developed to a point where, as I always say, he knows what I'm going to do before I do it. It knows what note you're playing or what chord you're playing. (phone rings) Is that me? It's my granddaughter. Hold on a second [inaudible?] Oh that's you. I went around the internet and found pictures of Casey Jones and I made a slideshow and put—because I had already recorded the song--and I put it up on YouTube and it's got a couple thousand hits, but I haven't made a cent on it. It's not a money thing, but it's--you know, I just want I like sharing, you know, historical--like, you may know the song The Fox Went Out On a Chilly Night? George Washington would have heard that song, it was from the 1700's. Burl Ives sang a song called The World Turned Upside Down that the British soldiers sang when they surrendered the George Washington at Yorktown. And those are kind of fun little backstories when you do a song, as long as the song also has merit. I mean, I have to like the song and enjoy singing it, and so I love historical ballads like that. And I'm still collecting, I'm not done. I just keep looking. I have all kinds of song

books that have that stuff in them and every once in a while I'll meet someone and say, "Oh, do you know this song?" and I kinda go crazy.

Mark Rodgers 25:04

And you emphasize that you're a historian of songs as well. So it seems like some of these recordings of historical songs that you do, you're doing this out of a sense of, wanting to preserve a musical past to carry it forward to, share it with the community, to share with children, but not just children.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 25:24

Exactly. Otherwise, the songs will be lost. I mean, you know, there's so many new songs coming out. Thousands or millions a week. People write new songs, and sometimes they use the old songs as a format, or they steal from them, or they, you know, or they've never heard them, they're reinventing the same song or same type of song, but there's all kinds. Shel Silverstein wrote amazing songs that most people have never heard. And Pete Seeger also wrote a lot of songs that are obscure. I mean, they know the famous one "If I Had a Hammer," and they know--what's the other one? Where Have All the Flowers Gone. And it's, you know, the young people today don't know that at all. They really don't. They're not actively seeking it, either. Unless they're taking your class (laughing).

Mark Rodgers 26:20

That's great. I wonder if we can actually backtrack just a little bit, though, to go back to your Montessori training. So at what point in your career did you take up--did you do the formal Montessori training?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 26:34

In 1980. I was still in the commune. And I took some Montessori training for like, it was a special summer intensive course. And my wife also took it the next year or two years later. And one of the things that impressed me incredibly, is one of the more expensive pieces of Montessori equipment is a set of musical bells. It's basically two chromatic scales. One is called a control group. And the other one is the mat. And so this one has the name on it, the other ones don't. And children learn to match them, just the sounds, and they also learn to play songs on them and various different things. But I was so impressed by that. Because I knew if you did that with three, four and five year olds, they would have minimally relative pitch, and possibly perfect pitch. Perfect pitch being if I played a note, you could tell me what it is right? I can't do that. I have relative pitch, I can imagine, you know, but I couldn't tell you oh, that's an E, B flat, no. And so I think that that's a tool, if used correctly, could give a child perfect pitch. And a lot of people don't even treat it that way. They don't think of it because not every child uses those bells or is attracted to those bells. In Montessori, it's kinda like, you follow the child. And if they're interested in something, you show them how to do it, and you also try to guide them in that direction, but in --for a piece of musical equipment. And so as--when I was teaching in Montessori, I use it all this--primarily as an individual activity. And I figured out a way to use it as a group activity, where I would sit in the circle with all the kids and I would have three bells with me on a little tray. And then I would say, "Will, somebody please bring me this?" Ding! And then one person would go over there and they would try to

find that bell, and everybody was listening. And so they would, "That's it! That's it!" they all would remark. So I mean, it's--when you're working with really little kids, and you understand development, that's the time. The sensorial development of three, four or five year olds is just paramount. It's just unbelievable what they could get if you're willing to spend the time and give it to them. So that and just I started writing songs my first year as a Montessori teacher, I started using the idea of children need to move. In Montessori, they're not restricted to sit still. They're encouraged to move so like, carry things here. It's not all group activity. It's primarily individual activity. But in our group activity, I started using songs that they got to do something rather than watch me because I'm so cool. Here I am playing guitar. I'm really cool. I--and to this day in my performances--it's not about me. It's about what can I get you to do? And Woody Guthrie is a complete genius in his writing of children's songs. He wrote a song called Put Your Finger in There, which (sings) put your finger in there (laughs). We're talking as simple as that, but it's cute and kids love it, you know. And he also wrote a song called Mail Myself to You, which is a funny song about making yourself into a package. And it's all physical action, wrap yourself in paper guide yourself. I did it with Pete Seeger once at [Northwest] Folklife and it was like, it's just so Montessori in that the children get to sing and move. And, so I started writing my own. And I have a bunch of them that I've figured out simple melodies to and just kept writing, and I do a lot of musical games and my public performances, I bring tambourines and shakers and get the kids in the band. And that's what this event on Monday, Make Music Day Seattle, is all about encouraging everybody to play music rather than just the musicians. You know, it's--music is one of those things you can actually teach yourself. Which I'm mostly--I mean--I've taken voice classes, I've taken one guitar lesson in my life, looked up many different ways how to play certain songs on the internet, but I'm basically self-taught. I've been very lucky, been able to just keep doing. I'm still going. I'm 70 years old, just getting started! (laughs)

Mark Rodgers 00:31:37

Well it seems like you've developed a real niche for yourself, and the combination of folk music and the Montessori tradition seems--it seems like a great fit, and you've quite a lot with that. So I do want to talk about the pandemic, and I'm going to kind of move us in that direction by asking a question first, not so much about the pandemic, but more about what a typical day of work was like for you before the pandemic.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:32:06

Before the pandemic, I would have one or two events per week, sometimes on Saturdays, sometimes on Sundays. And they would either be like a concert or a party, a senior center. And then anywhere--depending on which week, some weeks, I have six or eight classes, some weeks, I have four or five classes that I would drive to in Capitol Hill, Ballard, Magnolia, Queen Anne, things like that I would drive around and do those. And then I would spend time on the internet trying to generate work doing teachers conferences, and I'd get one of those. It might be a weekend, three day weekend sometimes. And then for the summer I did a lot of county fairs and festivals, small town festivals. I also function as stage manager and producer at some events in the summer. Like the one right here, the Festival of the River up in Arlington is put on by the Stillaguamish tribe, they've hired me for 20 years to manage their storytelling stage and kids' stage. So we would have kids things and storytellers. And then I did the Ballard Seafood Fest for many, many years where I booked all the entertainment and then performed, as well. So things like--I mean, there's no--every week was different. But the basic income came from the music classes, that was like the bottom line. I always had that. And then if everything else was going, things change, like in 2007 and [2008] when the economic crash happened, all the parks departments stopped hiring. They were doing summer concerts. I mean, Kirkland did one every Tuesday morning, a family concert all summer long. They did it for 25 years. And they just--they had to stop because the budgets were cut

and the parks departments were cut, libraries were cut, and the schools were cut. It was like, there was no more money for what you would call enrichment anywhere. But the festivals were still going. And my music classes were still going so changed. From that point on my business was basically cut in half. Without the parks--

Mark Rodgers 00:34:35

After 2008?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:34:37

Yeah. I thought it was just me. Well, I'm getting old, you know, maybe there's other people and other people were doing--there are a lot more people doing music for children. They were coming into the business at that point in time. But then also all the avenues of work were being diminished drastically. I thought it was just me, but I talked to other people, and they go, "Oh no, my business is down 60%, 50%, 80%." So people went out of business completely just because they only did parks and libraries. And so the library still hired a little bit, but not like they had been. And so I haven't--I've maybe done five libraries since then, where I used to do ten every summer. So it's--it might come back.

Mark Rodgers 00:35:31

So would you say that teaching has become a greater part of your work in general over the course of, say the past 20 years?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:35:41

No, it's stayed the same. It's always been there. I've always done it.

Mark Rodgers 00:35:46

But you have less performance work now than before?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:35:50

Well yeah, my income has been reduced. So you look at the reality, okay, there's no work. How many parks departments do you have to call and when you get no, every time you call, and we're not doing that anymore, she doesn't work here anymore, all the people that used to do it left their jobs, and I'm part of the King County Touring Artists Roster, and they even will pay half of your fee. People still don't use it. It's like the whole industry, kind of, the public--There's a famous quote from Quincy Jones that the music industry has been reduced to a tip jar for the gig worker, not so much for the orchestras and the symphonies and theater musicians, they have contracts in the union supports them. But there's, you know, the gig working is, has been on the way

out for a long time. And if I have any fear at all, with the pandemic is that things won't come back that existed before the pandemic, like county fairs that haven't had a fair for two years, will they be able to survive that? Or the Magnolia Summer Festival? They haven't had a summer festival for two years, will they still exist? We don't know. And we're not there yet because we're not really open yet, and it takes six months to plan those things. So we're gonna--it'll be a wait and see, but I'm seeing glimmers already. Like, I've been getting some emails and calls for this summer. It used to be get a call six months ahead. Now you're getting a call two weeks ahead, "We're doing something on July 10." Okay. Or tomorrow, "Can you come tomorrow?" Because people are starting to wake up. Oh, we should have--The senior centers that Doug and I have already done, they hadn't had anybody for 15 months. And they usually have somebody every week. And if there's a place where the casual musician works, that's one of them, is senior centers. And there's a lot of them around here, there's hundreds of them. And some of them have funding and some don't, but that's one of the avenues where people actually can work.

Mark Rodgers 00:38:15

I imagined that with the uncertainty about when things would start to reopen, that's also been something of a challenge with respect to bookings, because now people like the situation that you've just mentioned, all of a sudden, people wish they'd booked something maybe months ago, but they couldn't have the foresight. Right. So yeah, I'll want to ask you about the reopening for sure because it sounds like you've already had several interesting experiences there and things are starting to pick up for you again. But I--you know, especially the early months of the pandemic, the very beginning, I wonder if you could speak to the ways in which closures, cancellations, stay at home orders, all of that--how that affected your work in what must have been many different ways since you do so many different types of work.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:39:06

My last show was March 15. And that's my last public performance before a couple of recent ones that I've done. And it was like--it had already started, and I had a contract at Daniel Bagley Elementary School for 10 visits, and I had just done one (laughs) when it started, and they were already freaking out, you know, like little girls sneezed and the teacher freaked out like, "Oh my god, you can't sneeze without covering your mouth!" And I have always, when I go into a school, endeavor not to touch anything. For 25 years I've been doing that. It's like use your elbow to open the door, kick it with your foot or whatever, just try not to touch anything, certainly not the water fountain and then I don't want to use their bathrooms, you know what I mean? It's like, you just try to not have physical contact, because you know that kids carry the flu or whatever. But so my last show was March 15, and everything started being canceled. The senior centers all canceled right away. I had a teachers conference up in Calgary, that was canceled. I had one in Vancouver that was canceled. Everything just started dropping, like (makes explosion noise) and it's like, oh my God, what? And the way this thing started, nobody knew how long it was gonna last, it's just gonna last three weeks, or three months, or three years, nobody really knew, nor did anybody predict that. And so we just kind of--and so all the music classes that I had stopped. The schools closed, actually, the Montessori schools all closed. And they didn't reopen until I think, May or June. They started reopening using if they had a daycare license. And they used all the state protocols, windows open, fans blowing, air filters, everybody with a mask. Every child had to sit at their own tables, six feet apart, that kind of stuff. So I was able to start doing zoom, I don't remember exactly when I started doing zoom, I could probably look it up. But I started doing zoom classes from right here! This was my spot, I was back on the other end of the room, and do my--and you know, at first, I thought it was great, because we still at least have something. But if you study children long enough, you know that when they're watching television,

they know they can talk and you can't hear them. And with Zoom, you really don't hear them very well, even if you want to hear them. So getting them to sing was difficult, getting them to do anything was difficult, but I am good at what I do, so I was able to make it fun for them. And you know, every puppet has a song kind of stuff. You know, I have a big dog that sings a song called--I sing it for him--I've got a dog, his name is Blue, you know. And to give them a visual helps, but you still see the kids ignoring you, because it's a television, just like you know. And if they watch television at home, they know that they can ignore it if they want to, and so that lasted for a long time, almost a year.

Mark Rodgers 00:42:41

Do you feel like your experiences of that changed? I mean, did you become more comfortable teaching on Zoom?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:42:48

Like I said, I'm good at it. I'm good at what I do, so it was just--it was basically just adapting to the situation. I didn't do the same things that I normally do. I just changed what I did, gradually and not even dramatic. I use different material than I might have if I was there in person. But it's the same--but I always use that material anyway. I didn't create a whole bunch of new stuff for it. I just did it different, slightly different. I still did the xylophone, I still did the mountain dulcimer where I trick the kids. I have like a routine and I start off with a couple of songs, and then I get to do all those different--it comes in order. And they know what's coming. "Oh, we're gonna do that next." And sometimes they love it and sometimes they're like, "I don't want to do that today." But you know, the Zoom was palatable for awhile, but then it started getting old. And when I started going back in, I didn't want to ever do Zoom again. I said, "I'm done with this." Other people were like, "Oh, we got to get more into streaming, it's the future!" I said, "No, it's not. (laughs) You can have all that streaming you want." It's just--I don't know. I mean, this would be better if we were sitting across from each other talking. It's okay. But you know, I mean, we could be having a cup of coffee at some little place, wherever, you know, it's like the social part of the interaction with the kids is important, and they don't feel that as much with Zoom. And I have a couple of friends that have Zoom. There's a sea shanty group here in Seattle, that does sea shanties in person, and we all go down to the wooden boat center and sing sea shanties and it's just a whole lot of fun. Well, it doesn't work on Zoom. Just one person singing a song by themselves isn't the same as everybody singing together, and it's like, it didn't work, you know, and so I stopped going. Zoom just didn't cut it for me. I'd rather stay home and practice a song by myself. (laughs)

Mark Rodgers 00:45:01

That's really interesting because a lot of the folks that we've spoken to as part of this project to really emphasize that they feel like they've learned new things that they can kind of bring to their work after the pandemic. They can use Zoom to, you know, teach lessons with students in remote places, for example, things like that. But it sounds like you're looking forward to going back to the way things were before the pandemic?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:45:28

Well, I made a pact with myself. Many years ago, someone said, "Why don't you start getting your own TV show? You should have a kids' TV show!" And I said, No, I don't want to be the reason they watch television. I want to do it in person. I want them to know me. My first album called Songs for my Little Friends, I made it for the kids I knew. I had no idea what was going to happen with it. These were the kids I saw once a week, I'm just gonna record every single song I have created or collected up until that point in my career. And I put that album out, and I won a parent's Choice Award for it, and I said, "Oh, my God, this is amazing!" (laughs) And up until that point, I didn't want to ever play those songs in front of adults. If a parent were there, I would get uncomfortable. It was like, wow. But once I won that award, I said, "Oh, at least someone else thinks it's good (laughs) besides me." And so then after that, I stopped having that feeling, but I still believe that I don't want to be the reason they watch television. And that was the only way they could see me. Let's say, I'm a cripple, and I can't walk anymore, I can't drive a car anymore, then I would do it just to have some camaraderie with the kids, but as long as I'm capable, I think being there in person. And I wear a mask when I'm in those schools. And the kids are wearing masks. And we talked about it. I said, you know, I'm wearing this mask to protect you in case I have a bug. And that's why you're wearing a mask to protect me. You know, and we'll do it as long as we have to when the COVID pandemic is over we may have another one to deal with, or maybe the flu will be so deadly next time that we'll all be wearing masks again and washing hands a thousand times and hand sanitizers. So that's why I like doing live shows, I like going--I mean I was very, very lucky. Seven years ago, I guess it was I ran into this guy up in Canada that I knew and he said, "Have you heard of Dream On Productions?" And I said no, he said, "Check it out." So I went on the internet and it's a company out of Argentina that takes English speaking musicians and storytellers all over South America to perform at schools where the kids are learning English. So I sent them a link to my website, next thing and I'm in Colombia for a month going around to schools of all ages, from preschool all the way up through high school, with my ukulele and my dulcimer, (laughs) I didn't take a guitar on that trip, and my whistles--I don't know if you can see them back there, there's a whole string of whistles from all over the world that each one has a different sound and a little story to it, where it came from and who made it and what it's made out of. So I took those and one puppet, and I had a blast, and the kids loved it, and the teachers loved it. And then they took me to--where'd I go next?--to Mexico for a month, Guadalajara, Mexico City, Cancun. It was a tour, where I did two shows a day, four days a week, and then I had three days off. So they kind of made it a combination, like a work vacation, a workation I guess, you work four days, you have three days off, I had a full time guide with me, and it was okay. And then I did Peru. And then I'd had enough. Traveling to work is not like traveling for fun. The whole week would have been nice for vacation. But I liked the work. The work was--I mean, I had a blast. Back to what you were saying about learning things, I learned what works and what doesn't work on Zoom. I mean, that's part of it. And then these friends of mine that are getting all the way serious about streaming, it's like they think it's the future and I'm kind of going, "Ehh." It's because somebody that lives in Nova Scotia can watch your show now, and that's good. So everything's going to be live streamed from now on. I think that's one of the results of a pandemic. And in fact, my show is going to be live streamed on Monday, that I'm doing down on the waterfront. I think, they say it's I haven't gotten the link for it yet. I don't mind that, you know, but how many kids are going to watch it and benefit from it? I don't know. You know, Shari Lewis is?

Mark Rodgers 00:49:58

Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:49:59

Lamb chops play along.

Mark Rodgers 00:49:59

Yeah, yeah.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:50:03

She had a video called 101 Things to Do. I think that's what it was called. Anyway, after she described that, she goes, "Okay kids, turn the video off now and do it!" (laughs) Because otherwise they just sit there and watch the video over and never do the things because television doesn't lend itself to action. It's passive. Just watch me, watch me because I'm so cool or because it's a funny song or, I mean, that's kind of what you ended up doing on Zoom is you want to do something that's entertaining, rather than instructional, and I do both. And I can't think of anything else. Maybe someone come to me what else I learned about it, other than that didn't like it after a year. Because I knew the difference of them. It's like, so kind of Mr. Rogers come to your school. (airplane noises) The airplane there or here?

Mark Rodgers 00:51:04

Here, circling. Sorry about that. The--yeah, the--sorry, the plane threw me. So can I clarify at what point did you switch back to teaching in person from teaching on zoom? Or are you still doing a combination? Or is it all in person now?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:51:28

No, I'm not doing completely. It's been at least a month. So sometime early May.

Mark Rodgers 00:51:43

You said you were you were fully vaccinated and you were waiting for the schools to open or?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:51:49

The schools were already in session. What happened was once I was vaccinated, and then two more weeks passed, I started thinking, "Well, why not go in?" And so I started talking to teachers, and they said, "Yeah, but it's"--they were uncomfortable. I said, "Well, let's do it outside now." And that --they loved that. And so I started doing them outside. So one school I didn't have to do outside because they had such a big space where the kids weren't really close. So I had my second shot was March 20. So it was in the middle of April, when I started going. Of course the weather was nice. We had lots of nice. One of the Montessori schools is about a block

away from my house, so I just walk over there and sit in their backyard and the kids are--you know, it's part of the protocols is outside is safer. When you're in a small, confined space, even with masks, it's not very good. So I haven't had to do that. My wife's school has a really big open space where we had music. So when you're dealing with 15 to 20 kids, you don't want to have them be right on top of you and then vice versa. So that seemed to work. So once I started back, I didn't want to go back to Zoom. I did--I think I went back for one Zoom. I did one more for one school. The one on Capitol Hill this week, it was a rainy day and they couldn't they couldn't do the outdoor thing, so we just went back to Zoom and I went "Ugh, okay." I mean, live entertainment is you know, it's nice, live music.

Mark Rodgers 00:53:31

Yeah, absolutely. So speaking of live music, you've talked about how the social distancing affected your teaching, but did you continue? Did you do any live streamed performances especially early on?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:53:51

No.

Mark Rodgers 00:53:52

No?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:53:53

The only one thing I did there's a local folk group here called the Whateverly Brothers, and there's three guys in the band, and they had one time where one of them couldn't make it and asked me to be a substitute. I did that twice for them. But it wasn't my own show. One of the things I was doing all throughout the pandemic was recording videos and put them up on Facebook, but not for kids. I did adult stuff.

Mark Rodgers 00:54:23

What kind of stuff--what kind of content was in those videos? Yeah, absolutely. I just--Oh sorry, go ahead.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 00:54:26

Well, whatever song, either a song I wrote, or a song I resurrected from a long time ago to share with friends, because my Facebook's all friends, it's not really business. And every once in a while I'll--you know, the sun will seem appropriate for the time, or just to send out a little humor like, do you know Malvina Reynolds is? She wrote a bunch of kids songs, she's kind of like a female Woody Guthrie from the same era. She wrote a famous song called Little Boxes, (sings) Little boxes on hillside / Little boxes, made [?addicted?]. But she--I

found the songbook of hers, and I'm looking through it and I found this song called Bury Me in my Overalls. (laughs) I'm a gardener, I either wear suspenders or overalls, I can't imagine just wearing a belt anymore. And so I put that song up because it had some humor in it, and it was timely for all the old people that I know that are just sitting around looking at Facebook all day long. I didn't do any--I might have done a few kids songs. I just got inspired to do one song here, one song there, I didn't do whole programs, and I was just posting. And Doug and I, we didn't do anything that whole time. From March all the way till three weeks ago, four weeks ago, we didn't. We talked on the phone, but we didn't try to do any live streaming or nobody was offering us a gig live streaming. So I tried to get a few senior centers to do it but they didn't have that capability. Most of the seniors don't have computers or iPads or anything. They might have a computer, but they don't use it in that way. And they're not really into YouTube. And so we didn't have any, just the Zoom classes. That's all I did. That's why I'm glad to be back to work again. I mean, that's what fuels who I am. If I'm not working, I could not have imagined spending fifteen months and not doing any children's work at all. I would have gone crazy because that's been driving me for so many years, too. All of a sudden not doing the thing you love the most is like whoa, I remember one year, it was many years ago, I decided not to do classes in December for some reason, I don't remember what it was. And I said, "Ah, I miss singing Frosty the Snowman (laughs) and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, come on!" And then I learned some obscure Christmas song. So there's a Nat King Cole Christmas song called Mrs. Santa Claus. That's really cool! And it's like, you know, when you love music that gets transferred to your audience. If you really love that song and you play it well, then they love it too. And that's--it doesn't happen, I don't think, on Zoom. It might. But I mean, if you watch videos all the time, like, every once in awhile I'll watch a band or something on YouTube and watch twenty minutes of it or thirty minutes of a song, but it just doesn't do the same thing for me as if I'm in the third row, or the tenth row. I in 1991, I think it was, I took my family to see Burl Ives. He had moved to Anacortes, and he was doing a fundraiser for the hospital, and I said we got to go! It was \$25, which is a lot for a ticket. We were a young family and I was like--I took both kids and my wife and we were--there might have been a couple other people that weren't great here and there, but everybody else was old people raising money for the hospital. He did just wonderful shows, just amazing songs that I'd never heard and some that I had heard. And I just found that same concert, it's now on YouTube. It's called "Burl Ives' Last Solo Concert." It was his last show that he did by himself. And it's just him and his guitar sitting on stage, singing these cute songs. He leads the audience in a round, it's just classic folk style. The round he did is--let's see how how's it start again? (sings) All things must perish under the sky. You know that one? Music Alone Shall Live. He led that, and the song that got me that day was called The Chivalrous Shark. It's about a shark that only eats men, doesn't eat women or children, and from the 1800's. I went crazy, I had to learn that song immediately. I was like, "Oh, I gotta get that song!" It's just, I've been singing it ever since. (pauses) The maritime music community here is really interesting. There's kind of a lot going on. But it's really not very, you know, doesn't get a lot of press. There's a couple of different groups, there's the Shanty Singers, there's the Maritime Folknet. There's a contest that happens in Ballard--not in Ballard, actually, in Fisherman's Terminal. It's a Stories of the Sea contest where it's both music and stories. I won it one year, and then I've been MC for it a couple times. That's been canceled. I mean, there's a lot of great things that were going when this started, so we'll see if they come back. I think it won't be till next year. I think we'll have to go all the way till next summer before most things come back. It's possible, we'll see.

Mark Rodgers 01:00:38

Yeah, well, you mentioned that you've already done a couple of performances recently and you've got one coming up next week. Can you tell us what those have been like?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:00:00:48

The one I did in Yakima was a school graduation that was held inside. Nobody had a mask on, and I did my show. I was distanced, you know, ten, fifteen feet away from everybody. I did my show and did my normal thing. It felt great. It was--I was able to ignore any thought of the pandemic because by then I'd been vaccinated, I felt pretty safe, nobody's coughing in my face, the kids weren't up close. Sometimes I'll have the kids on stage with me and they're right next to me, and I know those are precautions I won't do for until they're all vaccinated, And then the senior ones, the first senior was we did we wore masks. And that was because that was their protocol. And that was hard, it's hard singing with a mask on. And the second--the next--that was the first two--first three we did with masks and then the next one, they all sat further away from us, so we were able to sing without masks. That was nice.

Mark Rodgers 01:01:58

Sorry, so you were wearing a mask at the first senior center gig?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:02:03

They were, as well. Everyone, you know, that's where--it's almost like this "we're trending." (laughs) Everybody was wearing a mask up until a couple of weeks ago. Now, lots of people are not wearing masks. But the first shows we did, everybody had a mask on, and we did. And the next two, they've all had masks on. And the fourth one was only the people that work there had masks. (laughs) And all the seniors didn't have them. And so I was surprised, I thought they might have had masks on too. You know, we're all going with the flow. You know, people are tired of wearing this, like carrying it around in my pocket. I always have a mask with me, so I don't mind wearing them. (pauses) Alright, any more questions?

Mark Rodgers 01:02:05

Okay. Well, I have many more questions, but I do want to respect your time here, since I told you--

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:03:01

I've got nothing going, I've got nothing going, and it's Friday, I got my wife won't be home for another hour, so if you want to ask more, that's nice. Well, get it out because you're not gonna want to do it again.

Mark Rodgers 01:03:12

I don't know, I think I might actually, I have many, many, many more questions after speaking with you. But I'll try to be concise here and stay focused. So with--because we were just talking about masks, and this is something we've been asking other folks as well. I mean, did you--have you encountered other attitudes toward masks than your own? You're clearly very friendly toward mask wearing, you're happy to do it, but have you

encountered other attitudes toward it as things--you know, before things were reopening, but also as things have started to open back up again?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:03:53

Early on, I was a little more confrontational. Or I would say things to people that weren't wearing masks. You know, like, I would say things like, "You know, Darwin's very interested in finding out why you're not wearing a mask," or, "You're gonna get the new--there's new--did you hear about the new individual Darwin Awards?" You know about the Darwin Award? So I would say things and people would get mad. Or I'd say, "How come you don't have a mask on?" "Don't tell me what to do!" you know, and I just said, "Well, you're standing around all these kids that I work with and you're not wearing a mask, and that affects me." But they don't people are just (pauses) I don't know. I don't think there's any simple answers to understand what's going on in our world anymore. I don't know if everybody even knows why they're thinking what they're thinking. They just believe us. My son lives in Idaho, their kids go to a school--or went to a school, they went hybrid. You have a choice, you can keep your kids in school half the time, all the time, or none of the time, and they chose none of the time because hardly anybody was wearing a mask. And as soon as the kids went back to school, a whole bunch of teachers got COVID and kids, and I was like, "Oh, thank God you didn't go back," you know, because it's, you know, and it's just, you know, it's touch and go there. And then mask burning ceremonies. (laughs) Like, and I did hear one thing when I was in Yakima, one lady said, "Oh, it's just another flu." I don't agree with that. It's the flu is also deadly for very old people who are compromised, but this is killing a lot, 600,000 people here in the United States, that's a lot. So that's more than the flu does.

Mark Rodgers 01:05:51

Well, and you work with children and the flu is also pretty bad for children, as well.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:05:56

Can be, yeah.

Mark Rodgers 01:05:58

So shifting gears a little bit, have you--so how, I mean, how--you've had fewer performances over the past year, but performances had been kind of a declining share of your work in general, it sounds like, since 2008. And I know your teacher conferences were canceled, as well. I mean, how much work would you say that you lost as a result of the pandemic, or in the end did you not actually lose that much?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:06:27

They said on taxes (laughs) I mean, I lost a lot. King County gave a grant for how many gigs I lost in King County alone. They gave us money. I've been on unemployment to make ends meet financially, and what a

difference. I mean, it's the first time in history, they ever gave unemployment to self-employed people. And I don't know, I mean, I could have survived without it, because my wife is still working, but it would have put a real crimp in my lifestyle. I mean, I just--I would have been hesitant to go to the grocery store. (laughs) But I mean, after 2008, I kept working, doing a lot of fairs and festivals in the summer, and in the wintertime, I would still get occasional events, but not like it had been since the schools weren't hiring and the parks weren't hiring, but I was able to still do okay. And then when this started, it took away all the performance stuff, which is at least half, if not more than half, of my income. So the school thing, you know, the classes are kinda like the base salary that you get, and then the rest of its--and performance stuff is way more lucrative. I started doing these music classes--what year was it? Let's see, since (mumbles) around '87, 1987, '86 or '87, that's when I quit teaching Montessori and went on my own. And I started charging \$50 a visit. I still charge \$50 a visit. (laughs) Occasionally, I'll charge a little more if they want me to go longer. That's the music class thing, but that's only if it's once a week. That gives me once a week for the whole school year. That's steady enough to keep me from being bored, I guess, but also keeps the money flowing. And the performance stuff comes and goes, like I got an email from the University Heights Community Center over there, they want me to do a show there on the tenth. Tenth or ninth or one of those, they're still negotiating. So little things, like one parks department called in SeaTac or one of those saying, "You know, the parks departments haven't done any programming for fifteen months for families or seniors. We're thinking about having outdoor summer concerts," and I just went (gasps) like, "Maybe it's going to come back!" They stopped doing it statewide. I was doing them from Bellingham, to Vancouver, Washington. I'd drive up and down I-5. I'd do them in Lacey, I'd do them in Olympia, I'd do them in Kent. I mean, they were all doing them and they all stopped. If they all come back, wouldn't that be something? I think they will. I mean, it's--but they're doing them more spontaneously, they're not--they're probably hiring who they know, and they're not looking for people as much, but we'll see.

Mark Rodgers 01:09:35

And are you concerned at all that there'll be a kind of double whammy where the unemployment stops being available to gig workers and the parks departments haven't started up their concerts again, is that a concern for you?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:09:52

I've been an entrepreneur my whole life. When I was a kid, I mowed lawns and shoveled snow in the wintertime for money, and I've always been able to figure out something. And even the music teaching thing is much more competitive now. There's a lot more people doing things than used to be doing things, and so I just got my eyes open, you know, what else is out there, what else I can do. I tend to reinvent myself every January, except this year, I didn't because I couldn't. So I'm kind of at that point right now, as of July 1, unemployment is going to require three job searches a week, I've been doing one or two. So it's not a big stretch to do three, I mean, sending an email or making a phone call. And my friend Doug and I, he has never done that. Really nice, okay, you want that \$600 a week, that's what he gets, because he's not doing music classes, I get \$200 or \$300. But I said, if you do three a week, and I do three a week, we're gonna get more work for the senior centers, because they're one group that's hiring as their budgets come back, some of them, that's--if there's a fear I have there, it's they're not going to get their budgets back, they just cut the budget. If you don't have to pay for something for two years, you use that money for something else and the next thing is, "wah, we're not gonna give you money for that anymore." So that's a worry, but we'll see. I feel pretty confident, you know, unemployment ends the first week of September, it's over. So by then, hopefully, those three jobs searches a week or ten, if I ended up doing ten. You know, it used to be busking was a real alternative for people, you could always go play at the

farmers' market, or Pike Place Market. But those people that do that don't make very much money. Even if you're really good, it doesn't matter, because people don't carry cash anymore. So what's happened is now people make a sign with their PayPal or Venmo account on it. And then people will tip them. I have a friend, that's a fiddler, travels all over the country busking. Basically, he's been doing it for forever. And he got so excited about that, and he actually makes decent money now. But he live streams that are on Facebook, so the people that are tipping him are all over the country. So that's working for him. The quality of the videos and the sound is good, but it's just his phone out on the street, it's just--I don't know. I'm still pretty confident, you know, things will come back, the camps will start coming back. I haven't done a camp for a long time. I usually get the Seattle Parks Department, for 25 years I've done their special needs kids camps, and I heard from them, they don't--their budget's been cut. And so I've gone to the union, I'm a member of the musicians union, and talk to them about, "Well, let's put together a grant and make sure they have music this summer." But that takes a while to make that happen. I brought that up at the last meeting, and I got kind of a go-ahead to pursue it, so it might take a month to make that happen. You know, it's--I'm not sure if you're familiar with those camps, those are the kids that have like down syndrome. I've been doing them forever. I can't imagine not doing like, I'll go over and do it for free if I have to. But you know, I just felt for them that their budget was cut.

Mark Rodgers 01:13:49

You mentioned--sorry to shift gears a little bit, but I was gonna ask you anyway about your union membership, and you just mentioned the union. So I wonder if you'd be willing just tell us a little bit more about which union that is and which local that is, and kind of your role in the union and how long you've been a member?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:14:06

Okay, I'm not sure exactly when I joined, around twenty-five years ago, twenty, twenty-two years ago, I joined what's known as the local 76-493 here in Seattle. And one of the reasons I joined is because through the union, you can get very affordable musical instrument insurance and liability insurance. And when you do festivals and fairs, they require you to have \$2 million liability policy that you have to put their name on. And so you show up at a county fair, they're not gonna let you unless you do that. And so that's one of the reasons I joined and also I knew a few people that were members. They had a workshop there one day, a guy named John McCutcheon, he's a fairly well known folk singer. And he was doing a workshop on marketing, the things you need to market yourself. That was back in the days of promo packs, you know, where you send photos and videos and that kind of stuff. And, and they had just started another union called the local 1000, which is a traveling musicians' union. And at that time I was traveling, I was going to Georgia, I was going to Montana, and all kinds of places, and so I switched from 76 to 1000, and I did that for about 10 years, maybe 12, before I switched back to 76. And then after about a year of being back with 76, they invited me to be on the board, so I'm a member at large on the executive board, we meet twice a month. I think they liked my perspective of kind of this experience I've had, you know, they're heavily oriented towards theatre and orchestra players, and they've lost a lot of members this year, they'll probably come back. But it's an interesting time for me, they need to get reinvigorated, and it hasn't happened yet, still not open. So almost everybody on the board is like me, on unemployment and teaching, they're mostly teaching and getting whatever little gigs--they're starting to get gigs, too, so it's--there's something that we use in--and I got into this big time when I was with local 1000--there's a thing called the Musicians' Performance Trust Fund. In the 1920s, the union fought with the recording industry to get them to give them money, because they said, "You're replacing live music, so give us some money and we'll use that money to create free live music." So I started using those on a regular basis for schools and libraries, and I was able to get vested in the pension by doing Trust Fund work. So I still do those,

in fact, I'm doing it on Monday. My show on Monday is a Trust Fund gig. And what happens with the Trust Fund is really interesting. Each union gets an allotment, and if you don't use it, the next year, you get less, maybe half, maybe two thirds, whatever. And if you don't use it again, you get less. And then if you use it all up, they'll give you more. And then that Trust Fund kind of went broke four or five years ago, six years ago, they were just in dire straits. And so there was less and less money available, but they figured out a way through all the live streaming things to get more money. And so now they're increasing their budget, and they're promoting things like this Make Music Day, which is international, but they're doing this, you know, in the United States. And they're offering all this Trust Fund money, which more and more people are using right now. It's really good because it was hard to get people to use it. They often designate what the money was for like seniors or kids or veterans, and so you had to go out and hustle a gig, the gig's not going to call you, you got to go find the gig, talk them into it, do all the paperwork to make \$200, and it's a hassle. But when you don't have any work, it's worth doing. So more people are using it. The local 76 just absorbed the union from Alaska, which had disintegrated. A lot of unions have no money at all, and so they can't afford to even keep their office open, so they're closing. So we've absorbed the Alaska union. There's still one in Spokane and the one just started in Boise recently, I don't know if they're gonna make it. But live performances, like all that stuff's about, the streaming thing is--the Trust Fund actually came around and said, "Okay, we'll sponsor live streams." So that's a recent development there, and how long that'll last, I don't know. I think that's about all I could tell you about the union.

Mark Rodgers 01:19:20

Well, that's really helpful, thank you. And then, so you've talked a little--I mean, you know, you mentioned some of the proposals you've made in your work with the union for supporting the camps that you were talking about before, but in terms of support that you or others around you have received, I think you mentioned receiving a grant from King County, is that right?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:19:48

They basically said, "How much money did you lose, or how many contracts and what was that worth?" And then I sent them that amount and they sent me a check for that.

Mark Rodgers 01:20:00

Was this through 4Culture or something else?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:20:03

Some of it was 4Culture, it must have been 4Culture, yeah. And then the Small Business Administration gave \$1,000.

Mark Rodgers 01:20:12

Was that a PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loan?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:20:14

No, it was not a loan. I didn't want to take any loans. It was just a grant.

Mark Rodgers 01:20:18

Just a grant.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:20:21

I mean, I--there were festivals that I was hired to do, already contracted, then it hit, that [?morning?] King County. It just said, "Canceled, sorry." There's no, there's no getting any money out of it. If you had a written contract and it was written well, maybe you would still get what's called a kill fee, but that's pretty rare. I mean, most of those, they don't do that kind of stuff.

Mark Rodgers 01:20:50

Yeah, yeah. Well, just a couple more questions from me, one kind of looking back and the other looking forward. Looking back, first of all, so you know, I know that you have a background and you worked once as a Montessori teacher, but you described yourself as gigging musician several times. And I wonder, do you prefer the kind of freedom that comes with being a gigging musician to choose jobs and to work in a variety of different ways to the, I don't know, the stability that comes with a regular teaching position?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:21:33

Well, I'll go back to when I decided not to do it anymore.

Mark Rodgers 01:21:36

Yeah.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:21:37

I'd been teaching, let's see, about nine, almost fifteen or sixteen years. It's not always Montessori, I was involved in alternative education before that. And it just--it got to my wife was running the school, I was one of

the teachers, it was kind of a--we both agreed that it was better if one of us went and did something else. And I had been developing my show, doing live shows, in fact, I would be at a park somewhere with our kids and somebody said, "Oh, can you come to our school?" when I got the idea. Pete Seeger had done that when he was banned from television. For sixteen years he did schools and camps. And so I said, "I could do that!" And so I immediately just started hustling. And the one thing about not having a full time job is that you have all day, every day, to work on your career. And so I was on the phone, all the time, I was mailing things constantly, putting out brochures, and it worked. I mean, it took a while, I did all kinds of other things, you know, to survive, but it was, you know, eventually I made more money than I ever did as a teacher. And the benefit was I had free time, I had time to practice my guitar, I had time to learn songs, I had time to work on various things, you know, the props. And I started, you know, just, I like the freedom of it. The stability that I have is my music lessons. I guess that's what--you could call that stability because it's like, I always have those. I have six a week, that's \$300 a week. That's, that's a nice base pay, (laughs) as long as you have the other things coming in. And I've raised a family and we haven't paid off our house yet, but we're getting there. But you know, I've been doing it long enough that I feel like it was the right choice. Now, I've actually considered going back to teaching. There's a shortage of teachers. But you know what? I'm 70 years old. I don't know that I want to be down on the floor with kids all day long every day. I like going in and doing the special stuff and leaving. It's not--I could, in a pinch, do it. I could be a substitute teacher if I wanted, or I could take somebody's place from sabbatical if they went away for two months or something, but to do it--just what I saw in the last few days, when teachers get to the end of June, they're fried. They're really fried. I don't think people understand the level of tension or stress that they are under, dealing with these little kids that aren't necessarily listening and aren't necessarily obedient, and after a while you're ready for that break. We have summer vacations for a reason. (laughs) So it's--I'm thinking about the famous choir director from Sleepy Hollow, Ichabod Crane, you know, that taught those kids (tapping) then got chased away by the Headless Horseman But you know, it's a lot of work. Most people that teach love it, and I love working with kids, and I love working with educators, and I hope that comes back. I have one proposal I need to put in for a teacher's conference. Other than that, nobody's started up again. The ones that were canceled I contacted and they didn't answer my email, they probably are gone. They're not even doing it anymore, or even thinking about doing it, so...I think it'll take a while, and maybe a year from September, everything will be normal. Maybe. It's hard to say. Did that answer your question okay?

Mark Rodgers 01:25:42

Yeah, that answered my question, and it segues nicely into the next question, which as I said before, it's about looking forward. You mentioned before that you reinvent yourself every year, and then you didn't do that the beginning of 2021. What do you have--(laughs) What do you think the reinvention will look like and--

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:26:03

Well, when I say reinvent myself, I look at, "Okay, what am I going to do now? What's gonna--what could I possibly do right now?" And I jokingly say I'm going to be a beach bum this summer. (laughs) Because I don't see anything happening this summer. I mean, a couple of gigs might happen. I've got, let's see, I have a couple of senior centers, I have one on the Fourth of July, I've got one school in August, and I have a few music classes this summer. That's it. It's really bleak, considering I might have 40, or as many as 80 concerts in a good summer, I'm not anywhere close. But I am still getting some unemployment, so I'm not freaking out about the summer. But in terms of reinventing myself, what's what's September gonna be like? It's still a big unknown, whether the kids are still gonna be wearing masks or not. Whether, like Daniel Bagley [elementary school], the

place that I have that--I had that contract wiill redo that contract. Because they're not gonna probably let anybody into their building, besides the staff themselves, they're probably not even letting the parents in the building yet. So it's like, I don't know when those kinds--So I'm at this point in time thinking a lot about what else could I do? Going back to teaching, of course, it's that first thing that came to mind, well, I can always get a job as a teacher, but I don't want to do that, and I'm overqualified. And also, I've been free too long. I don't think I could capitulate to rules very well, at all. I think I would be a rule buster and get in trouble a lot. (laughs) "You can't do that!" Oh yes, I can. I have, you know, I mean, that's the beauty of the freedom of being self-employed. The downside is you're always looking for a job, which is kind of where I'm at. So what's--you know, I may apply for some grants from 4Culture, look at that and see, there may be some other help in that sense. But see, that doesn't cut it for me, because that's not working. Somebody gives me money, right? I got some money, but I'd rather be working, and the busking thing is not something--I've done it in my life, and sometimes I go over to the Ballard Sunday Market early in the morning and do just dulcimer because that's when the parents of little kids are there, and then I leave. I don't stay past noon. To do that all day, put up on all that people walking by and talking and ignoring you, that's really hard for somebody that's been where I have. I've performed in Benaroya Hall! (laughs) The first year Benaroya Hall happened, I had been working at the old--I guess it was an opera house? Is that where they used to have the symphony?

Mark Rodgers 01:29:09

I'm afraid I haven't been in Seattle long enough to answer that question.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:29:12

But there's a program called Discover Music that the Seattle Symphony did. It was a children's program, where they did things like Peter and the Wolf and it was on a Saturday morning, they did it once a month or something like that, or four times a year, whatever it was, and the Seattle Public Library used to hire me to go and set up in the third floor lobby and do a program before the program, so the people had something to do when they got there early. And I got to know all the people from the symphony, and when they moved to Benaroya Hall, they said, "Oh, you got to come be part of our committee and help us plan this new thing called the Tiny Tots Concert Series." You know, you've probably heard of that. And so I sat in their meetings and went to a bunch of different sessions and I produced the first year, which was myself doing one show, and then there was a--I think it was a trio--of clarinet players, and then there was this woman called Identical Harmony. I think they were twins, or the two women called themselves, anyway. And I said to them, "You know, they really should have a microphone." They said, "Oh this is the--" I can't remember the name of the recital hall. It's not the main hall, the second hall. "There's impeccable acoustics, you don't need a microphone." I said, "The microphone's not for sound, it's for audience control. It's so that those kids can hear you because they're not going to sit still and be quiet." And they wouldn't listen to me. I succumbed to it. So the first show was the clarinet trio and they bombed, they just bombed, the audience would not pay attention. We're talking about mom's bringing in four or five kids with them, daycares, they didn't *bomb* bomb, but they just couldn't control the audience. And so they gave me a microphone, so I did the second one. I had a couple of little kids come out and play Twinkle Twinkle on their violins. I had a friend of mine who was a juggler come out and juggle to music. And it went really well because I knew how to control the audience. And then the other people that came did okay, but they finally agreed that the microphones are necessary, not for the sound quality, but to keep the interest. The other thing that really appalled him was how much trash they found. (laughs) You know, juice boxes, banana peels, people with kids always bring food. So that was the--I helped them get that going. And that was fun. I got my name in lights on Second Avenue there, and I gave out a lot of business cards. And I think it hurt my business rather than

helping. It didn't hurt my reputation, but people thought, "Oh, if he performed at Benaroya Hall, he's way too expensive for us to have come to our school." So I gave out hundreds of business cards and didn't get any calls. I'm kinda going, "Shit, that was weird." You get your name up in lights, you're too expensive. They won't call you.

Mark Rodgers 01:32:23

Wow, that's--I wouldn't have guessed. But that makes all the sense in the world.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:32:33

Well, in my world, there was a guy named Tim Noah. You ever heard of him?

Mark Rodgers 01:32:38

I don't think so, no.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:32:39

He had his own TV show here for a while he did kids concerts and he was big. He would make \$2500 or more for a concert. And he got--he was so big. Then the market changed, and the people's budgets changed, and they couldn't afford him anymore. But they could afford somebody like me for \$250 or \$350, and so they started having more events like that. And when you get too expensive, you kind of have to tour, you got to get on the road, you go where people can afford it, or not work. And that's what happened to him. People stopped hiring him because he had gotten too big and he wasn't interested in being on the road all the time, I mean, I had a family. And I did a lot of road work, but I was home more than I was away. It wasn't like I was out on nine month tours. I'd fly to Georgia for a week, do a week of assemblies and come home. I'd go to Montana for three days and then come home. It wasn't like--I used to drive to Portland to do two shows, one at ten and one at one o'clock. I'd leave at five o'clock in the morning, drive to Portland, and come home that night. I didn't even stay overnight. That was--I didn't mind the driving, I was young. I wouldn't do that today, no way I would do that. I would drive down the day before and spend the night, do the shows and spend the night again. (laughs) That's too stressful. But back then I was a road warrior I drive to all over the place. (pauses) So, all right, now where are we going?

Mark Rodgers 01:34:11

Well (laughs) I mean, I am curious to know a little bit more about how you got those gigs in Georgia, say, or Montana. How did you hook up with the schools?

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:34:28

Good story in Georgia. I had a friend here that was a juggler, of mine, very good entertainer, and we would do lots of fairs and festivals together. I'd get him work, he'd get me work, and he moved to Atlanta. I said, "What are you doing move into Atlanta?" He says, "My wife's a minister, she got to church, I'll come back." So I would bring him back every once in awhile and get him a bunch of gigs and he'd come back and I said to him, "Well, what are you gonna bring me to Georgia?" He said, "Alright." So he went around and got all these gigs, and I went and did a tour of Georgia. The first gig was at a comedy club. No, it wasn't, it was a country club. It was an adult show. I was the opening act, and there were two comedians, the juggler and this other guy, famous guy named Brad Upton. And they said to me, "Do ten minutes, and we don't care if you bomb, just play a few songs, and we'll be happy, no matter what you do. This year, the opening act, we want to be the funny guy." So I get up on the stage and I asked for a volunteer from the audience because I wanted to do Shel Silverstein's song The Unicorn. I don't know if you know this song or not, but the Irish Rovers made it famous, it's (sings) Their a long--well, there's a chorus where you act it out--(sings) green alligators and longneck geese, humpyback camels--famous bar song, Irish bar song. Anyway, unbeknownst to the two comedians and myself, the audience had decided to goof on the entertainment that night. And Otis, it was his birthday, and he was already drunk. So when I asked for a volunteer, they sent Otis up, and he proceeded to untune my guitar, knock off my hat and had everybody laughing really hard. And I look side stage, the two comedians are going, "What are you doing?" (laughs) And I got off that stage, boy was I glad to get off that stage. Anyway, I did this tour, it was a week long tour, and the last part of the tour was a festival in Columbus, Georgia, and the lady that ran the festival was the arts coordinator for the county. And she said, "You're hired." So for what? She says, "I want you back here to do an entire week of schools." And I did that for 10 years, until she retired. Getting those gigs. There's a group, I don't know if they still exist, called Young Audiences. It's a national organization, I think it's based in New York or [Washington] DC that has local chapters. I was part of the Portland chapter, so I've got lots of gigs in Portland through that. You're part of our roster, like the King County touring artists roster. And that's how I got gigs in Oregon, and then people would see that and then they'd bring you to Montana. I used to do this festival there called the Montana Storytelling Roundup. And that got me--once somebody saw me in a school in Montana, then I started going through that where I played music and told stories. I like to do both, I like telling stories and playing songs both, I think it's, you know, sometimes it's just the backstory in between the songs, but other times it's a longer story. So I did that festival about three times. And, you know, there's organizations like the National Storytelling Association that I never got a single gig from, never. You pay your dues, you get the magazine, and you get all the junk mail from the advertisers, but you never got a gig. And so I finally let the membership go and they called me up like, "Why are you leaving us?" I said, "Well, I joined in hopes that I'd get some work, and I never got any work. I got a lot of junk mail though!" And they said, "Oh, we're sorry." Getting gigs is probably the hardest thing there is to do, and it's usually by mailing brochure--it used to be mailing brochures or promo packs, there's festival directories where you look up all the festivals. "This one sounds good, it's the right weekend for me." You mail stuff to them, and you call them, and a lot of cold calling, a lot of just connections. Ninety percent of my work is repeat business, or business from somebody that I met. Like if you go do a show, somebody says, "Oh will you come to our festival?" "Sure, here's my card." And then you know, that's how you get things, it's who you know and who you've met, and that could also be something that stopped now because those people might not be doing it anymore. They might have switched jobs, retired, moved away. That's yet to be seen how that's gonna affect the local--I mean, when I left the local 1000, I pretty much decided to stay local and not really travel much anymore. I got tired.

Mark Rodgers 01:39:26

During the pandemic at any point is you think, "Oh, maybe I could tap into some of those connections?"

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:39:33

I talked to the guys that do the South America thing. (laughs) They're not doing it. They're not even thinking about it. So it's--anybody that I've talked to has basically said, "We're in a wait and see mode. We're waiting to see what happens. Is it gonna come back, is there going to be a budget?" A lot of people won't even respond to an email about it, which is normal. People don't respond to emails, except for you, you do, and I do.

Mark Rodgers 01:40:07

Slowly, and you do, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:40:10

You know, I used to tell people, I said, "My phone and my email, I check at least twice a day, if not more," because when something comes in, if you don't respond to it right away, they may be going down the list, and if you don't respond, they're gonna pick somebody else. It's happened to me more than once, like, I get a call somebody leaves me a voicemail, and I answer it in an hour later. "Oh, sorry, we already booked somebody." I kind of go, "Great." (laughs) So that's why instantaneous--that's why a lot of people like that on their phones, they answer their emails on their phones, because it's that quick, you can lose something that quick, but I don't know about what's--I mean, I actually wouldn't mind traveling again now, I've reached that point, that would be an acceptable reinvention. Okay, I've had the year and a half at home, and I've had almost ten years of not really traveling. I mean, I'll go out to the Olympic Peninsula. I'm part of a different group of people that goes out to Astoria, I've done shows in Astoria, I still do things in eastern Washington. I used to do a lot more schools over there, I haven't been doing those. It's once again, I'm gonna have to reinvent myself, and I don't know what that is yet. Got any ideas? (laughs)

Mark Rodgers 01:41:32

(laughs) I'm afraid not. (laughs)

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:41:35

I will tell a musician, or anybody who's self employed, the very best form of advertising is still the business card because you put it in their hand. So make it really nice, I put a nice picture on it and information on the back, because they keep it! And it's still the very best. I mean, you can--if you have a website, you still have to drive people to that website. How do you do that? They're not looking for you. They don't even know they want anything. So they're not looking--people aren't searching for children's entertainers or--there's an agent here in town for Live Wires. This is a funny story. In the 70's, I was walking down the street, and this lady, this red-haired lady was upset. She had this huge wooden birthday cake that the hinge had broken off the top, it was basically for strippers to jump out of. And she said, "Oh the hinge is broken!" And she looked at me and she said, "You fix things? I'll pay you \$20 to fix that." I said, "Okay," so I went and got two new hinges and fixed it for her. And she has an agency called Live Wires that used to do a lot of strip telegrams, and now they're doing

family entertainment, they're not doing the strippers, they do actors, and characters, and people, you know, you want to have the princess come to your kid's birthday party, that kind of stuff. And they get me a few gigs. They've got me stuff up on Whidbey Island at the military bases, and the military used to hire a lot more entertainment for their kids, but not lately. That might--we'll see if that comes back. The tribes you know, there's another place, they hire people sometimes. (pauses) Next question.

Mark Rodgers 01:43:38

(laughs) I think I'm running out of the questions that I had prepared to ask you. I'm also looking at the time, and I think I, unfortunately, I need to get home. I've got an eight month old daughter.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:43:51

Oh, wow.

Mark Rodgers 01:43:52

And I think I gotta get home in time for bedtime, but--

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:43:56

You better sign her up for a Montessori school now. They have waiting lists.

Mark Rodgers 01:44:01

Waitlists, I know it's incredible, yeah.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:44:05

Well, I appreciate you doing this and in maybe someday you'll invite me to your class.

Mark Rodgers 01:44:10

Yeah, I'd love to--

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:44:12

We can have a session, and you know, and I would love to come and share some songs and talk about, you know, I mean--what Doug and I kind of talk about is the history of Americana folk music, which includes jazz and blues, everything, jug band music, all the different kinds of music that have happened in this country that were popular at one time that are vanishing, you know, because everything's new, you gotta have the new stuff.

Mark Rodgers 01:44:46

Yeah indeed, and I'll try to--I'll keep you in mind, absolutely for--I teach a wide variety of classes and I think some of them, they can definitely be appropriate, so for sure, once we're--once we have musicians back in the building again, I will be in touch.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:45:04

Do they have a teacher's program there?

Mark Rodgers 01:45:08

Yeah, we have a music education program, and you know, offline, once we stop recording, you know, I'd be happy to talk for a little bit.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:45:16

I will teach them how to use xylophone. (laughs)

Mark Rodgers 01:45:19

(laughs) That's awesome.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:45:24

When you break it down to that simple, it's hard for people, you know, because people like to be complicated, they like to be sophisticated, but when you work with kids, you got to get started out really simple and make it so they can succeed.

Mark Rodgers 01:45:39

Yeah.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:45:40

And add onto that. So it's--I've actually thought that in terms of my reinvention, I've thought about contacting SPU [Seattle Pacific University] and different places that have teachers' programs and see if I could get--I don't know if they'll pay me--but at least start going in there. And if you do one and they like it a lot, then the next time when they want you back they're gonna have to cough up some money or I won't go. But it's--I love working with teachers and a young--there's a big kindergarten conference in California that I need to send a proposal to. It's, you know, kindergarten teachers, first grade teachers that are new.

Mark Rodgers 01:46:22

Yeah.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:46:23

I have so much that I could share with them.

Mark Rodgers 01:46:28

I'm gonna go ahead and stop recording now.

Allan (Al) Hirsch 01:46:31

All right.